LIFELONG LEARNING AND DISTANCE EDUCATION*

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The Place of Distance Learning in Higher Education

The roots of university-level distance education go back many years, but the perception still remains in many quarters that distance courses offer at most a type of "back-door" learning or are a second-best substitute for on-campus instruction. In universities with both traditional on-campus courses and distance programmes, the latter often have to struggle for legitimacy and a recognition that standards are equivalent to those of regular offerings. As a defence against criticism, distance educators often strive to replicate face-to-face instruction as closely as possible, for example by insisting on a common syllabus and examination, basing distance learning materials on the content of on-campus lectures, using a standard textbook, and perhaps having the same individual teach both versions of the course. For example, in the University of Waterloo's correspondence programme, instruction is paced throughout the term as it would be for on-campus students, a set of audio cassettes is intended to serve the function of live lectures, course notes provide what might be written on the blackboard or issued to on-campus students as handouts, assignments consist of traditional essays and term papers, textbooks are used in the same way in both types of course, and correspondence courses have compulsory final examinations. A somewhat similar approach to meet a comparable concern is reported by Duignan and Teather (in press) with respect to University of New England.

There is no doubt that a great boost for the credibility of university-level distance education has been provided by the creation of the British Open University and its achievements over the past 15 years. Here too there were initial concerns about educational standards, and it is interesting that one partial response was to imbue the new institution with many of the trappings of an established British university, such as degree convocations, a traditional departmental structure and academic titles, and even a student newspaper. At the same time the approach to course development and delivery pioneered by the OU represented a significant innovation for British higher education.

In my own work as Teaching Resource Person at the University of Waterloo I have a professional concern with the improvement of teaching and learning throughout the University, and not simply in Waterloo's large correspondence programme. Because I am not sanguine about the effectiveness of many teaching methods used in traditional higher education, I do not simply take for granted the desirability of simulating these approaches when designing distance education courses. Rather, I would argue that distance instruction should be judged not primarily in comparison to "mainstream" university teaching, simply because the latter has existed (and often remained unchanged) for very many years, but should set its own educational goals and strive to realise these

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as fully as possible, using whatever pedagogical approaches and delivery methods are most effective.

It is true of course that certain instructional options are not feasible -- or very difficult -- in distance teaching. But it may be possible to "make a virtue out of necessity" by capitalizing on the special qualities of distance students and the rather unique learning situation in which they are placed. This might mean, for example, exploiting students' greater maturity, life experience and motivation. By being thrown back on their own resources they can be encouraged to become self-directed, autonomous learners capable of guiding their own studies throughout life and able to call upon a wide variety of learning resources that stretch well beyond the facilities of the institution delivering the instruction. Even for on-campus students who have the benefit of regular class meetings (lectures, tutorials, etc.) it is known that the bulk of their learning takes place outside the classroom and in the absence of an instructor. (Ramsden and Entwistle, 1983, have provided a recent overview of research on the way students study.) In this sense the situation of the distance learner might be regarded as an extreme case of traditional classroom learning. To push the point even further, it might be that instead of striving to replicate the conditions of the classroom for the remote student, we should instead be trying to instill in traditional students the independent study approaches that distance learners are forced to adopt from necessity.

Lifelong Learning: A New Catchword for Continuing Education

This argument rests of course on the underlying assumption that a major goal of education is to produce students who can guide their own learning. This is a basic precept of "lifelong learning" -- a term that has been used with increasing frequency in relation to both continuing education and distance instruction. At first sight the idea inherent in lifelong learning is disarmingly simple, presumably referring to the fairly obvious notion that people begin learning from the moment they enter the world (actually shortly after conception) and continue to do so throughout their lives. However, as a slogan, lifelong learning seems to have an appeal both for educators and students alike, and it has been employed widely in promotional material for otherwise traditional continuing education and distance programmes across North America. Used in this way (which a cynic might say is a means of changing the label without changing the product), lifelong education might be no more than a means for promoting lifelong schooling, offered through university extension programmes or correspondence courses, and attracting new populations of students in an era of levelling or declining enrollments and increasing fiscal constraints.

Faure's Concept of Lifelong Learning

The concept of lifelong learning received considerable worldwide attention with the publication of Edgar Faure's book, Learning to Be, in 1972. Subsequently UNESCO adopted lifelong learning as a

guiding principle for educational reform and has actively promoted the concept through a large-scale programme of research, publications, and policy guidelines.

Faure and his associates conceptualized a system of learning which would be:

- available throughout an individual's lifetime;
- would respond to each person's needs to cope with the demands of contemporary society;
- would involve learners in guiding and directing their own learning;
- and would encourage learning from a variety of sources, both formal (for example schools) and non-formal (for example in the workplace or from colleagues).

In other words the message underlying Learning to Be could be summarised by saying that learning should be "from life, for life, and throughout life".

Faure advanced a number of reasons for the importance of lifelong learning as opposed to other educational approaches. The underlying philosophical assumptions of the concept included a desire to democratize education (as opposed to encouraging what was seen as the "authoritarianism" of the school and reliance solely on "experts" to provide instruction), the desire to provide equality of opportunity in education (in contrast to what was seen as an "elitist" model guiding much contemporary schooling), and a will to improve the quality of life for people of all nations and in all circumstances (the idea of education as a means of self-actualization). In addition to these philosophical reasons, Faure also offered the pragmatic rationale for encouraging lifelong learning that it would enable individuals to cope with a world of increasingly rapid and dramatic change -- change not only in the workplace but in society at large and even in social relations (e.g. family structure).

This brief summary of Faure's ideas should make it clear that his conception of lifelong learning and lifelong education cannot be regarded as simply a restatement of principles of adult education, recurrent education, or even continuing education. Of course these educational approaches are not incompatible with the ideas of lifelong learning: indeed, they can be embraced within the philosophy of lifelong education developed by Faure. He would argue, however, that lifelong learning is a much broader concept than continuing, recurrent, adult, or distance education. It encompasses the whole life of the individual, and not just the adult years, is not restricted to formal educational establishments, such as schools and universities, nor to any specific types of media or delivery systems.

Lifelong Learning: Implications for Distance Education

By broadening educational opportunities and reaching new populations of learners distance education appears to fulfil at least some of the criteria for lifelong learning spelled out by Faure and his colleagues. Knapper and Cropley (1985) have discussed the principles of lifelong learning in relation to the

organizational systems and teaching methods used in contemporary colleges and universities, and have developed a list of relevant criteria derived from the work of Faure and a number of other seminal writers on lifelong education. Although Knapper and Cropley's main focus is not on distance education, they do discuss distance learning programmes as one mechanism for helping promote learning throughout life, and it is interesting to examine their comprehensive set of criteria against some of the major components inherent in distance teaching.

The authors distinguish between pedagogical criteria that relate to aspects of teaching and learning, and criteria that focus on organizational systems within higher education institutions, thus affecting the way instruction is offered and learning takes place. Table 1 lists the pedagogical criteria, while Table 2 represents the organizational criteria.

TABLE 1: Pedagogical Criteria for Lifelong Education

Students plan their own learning
Students evaluate their own learning
There is a stress on formative assessment methods
Active learning methods are emphasized
Learning takes place in both formal and informal settings
Learning takes place from peers
Material from different subject areas and disciplines is integrated
Learning strategies are tailored to the student's situation, the nature of the task, and the instructional objectives
Learning focusses on real-world problems
The process of learning is stressed at least as much as instructional content

In each case it is possible to examine items on the list (individual criteria) and consider to what extent they are fulfilled by different educational approaches, including distance learning. For example, if the attributes listed in Table 1 are considered in relation to traditional on-campus university teaching (which involves paced instruction, teaching by the largely didactic lecture method, and assessment by means of a formal final examination), then it is clear that few of the criteria for lifelong learning are fulfilled. In other words, traditional teaching approaches in universities do not involve students in the process of planning instruction, evaluating learning from peers, integrating material from different subject areas, and so on.

Turning to Table 2, traditional higher education is not especially flexible in course content and organization, rarely gives credit for life experience, only occasionally encourages links with outside work settings, hardly ever employs non-professional teachers, and so on. Clearly this is an oversimplification, and many examples could be cited of exceptions to this generalization in some institutions or with

particular instructional approaches and organizational systems that range from project-based teaching to work-study programmes. Knapper and Cropley provide an extensive review of such innovations, but conclude that the instructional methods and means of organization in much of higher education is incompatible with the principles of lifelong learning.

TABLE 2: Organizational Criteria for Lifelong Education

Participation by a broad cross-section of the population
Integration of general and vocationally-oriented education
Flexibility in the content and organization of instruction
Credit for prior learning experiences in both formal and non-formal settings
Close links between education and the world of work
Use of non-professional teachers and resource people where appropriate
Emphasis on self-instruction
Provision of help with learning and study skills

An interesting question -- and one not considered in any detail in Knapper and Cropley's book -- is to what extent distance education might fulfil the criteria listed in the two tables above. On the whole, a good deal of distance teaching fares a little better than traditional on-campus instruction in this respect. There are some obvious areas where distance methods appear to be superior, and a number of other areas where there is considerable potential for the encouragement of lifelong learning.

Looking first at Table 1, in most distance education programmes students are involved to a considerable degree in planning their own learning, and this applies especially in non-paced programmes. Equally, in some distance courses students may be allowed to evaluate their own learning, although the results of such evaluation are rarely used as part of the official grade or credit for the course. It is fair to say that most distance programmes encourage active learning, at least in the sense that students must take responsibility for their own learning to progress through the course -- they cannot sit passively at the back of the lecture hall. Similarly, in some institutions distance learners do have the opportunity to engage in peer learning (for example by means of regional study groups or teleconferencing); there are some notable instances of distance courses that succeed in integrating material from different subject areas; and some distance courses even attempt to encourage learning in both formal and informal settings -- for example by involving students in projects within their own communities. On the other hand, there are very few examples of formative assessment in distance courses, of tailoring learning strategies to the particular situation in which students find themselves, or of student self-evaluation against real-world

criteria. It may be also true that because of the difficulty of involving distance students in discussions or workshops, there is a temptation to downplay the processes of learning and unduly stress mastery of content, which can be transmitted more easily using non-interactive media such as print.

In the case of Table 2, once again distance education does not by any means fulfil all the organizational criteria for lifelong learning, but does rather better than traditional teaching approaches in higher education. For example, it is clear that most special-purpose distance education institutions encourage a much broader range of individuals to participate in their programmes than conventional universities, and the same is often true for distance programmes within traditional establishments. Furthermore, distance courses, be definition, encourage much more self-instruction than regular university programmes. Some distance institutions allow credit for life experience, but this is by no means the norm. Flexibility in course content and organization is, by the nature of distance teaching, difficult to achieve, although a number of universities (for example Athabasca) have introduced self-paced courses that at least partly meet this criterion. On the other hand, few distance programmes have achieved links with outside work settings, virtually none employ non-professional teachers to supplement their instruction (except perhaps as regional tutors), and help with learning skills and other counselling needs of students is notoriously difficult to provide in a distance mode.

Conclusions

The foregoing brief discussion introduced some criteria for promoting effective lifelong learning in universities and examined the way in which distance education does -- or might -- fulfil these requirements. In terms of the principles set forward by Faure, Knapper and Cropley, and others, distance instruction has two enormous advantages over much of traditional higher education. In the first place it has the potential for substantially broadening access to higher learning and hence for fostering greater equality of educational opportunity; in the second place it places a major emphasis on self-instruction, active study methods, and students' taking responsibility for their own learning. In the case of the other listed criteria, surprisingly few are impossible to achieve by distance education, and the remainder, while frequently neglected in existing distance programmes, have been achieved in at least some instances, and could in theory be incorporated into a great many more. The writers on lifelong learning mentioned here are not the only advocates of having as a major goal for distance programmes the encouragement of student autonomy in learning. For example, this is a point of view strongly espoused by Holmberg (1985), who even rejects pacing in distance education because it places constraints upon the extent to which students may direct their own learning.

At the same time, by no means all distance educators espouse the goal of promoting independent, autonomous learning, and even those who do may not succeed in achieving this goal in practice. Indeed, there may well be a "pull" in university distance

education programmes towards replicating conventional models of instruction. This seems especially likely in dual-mode universities whose major activity is on-campus teaching in traditional programmes. The example of Waterloo's correspondence programme has already been described in some detail above. While the approach used at Waterloo appears to be very popular with students, and course completion rates are high, it begs the question of whether the methods employed best serve the needs of students from a lifelong learning perspective.

Interestingly, this dilemma is not confined to dual-mode institutions. For example, Athabasca University in Alberta, Canada, was established specifically to develop and teach distance courses, and its programmes incorporate professional course design, a team approach to course development, freedom for students to proceed entirely at their own pace, and use of a variety of instructional strategies and support services aimed at promoting learner independence. According to Rubin (1985), however, over the past ten years Athabasca has seen increasing pressure to retreat from its innovative methods of instructional development and adopt more conventional means of course preparation, organization, and delivery.

These pressures are brought not only by faculty -- who have generally received their own higher education in traditional universities, and may have limited knowledge of educational theory or teaching methods. Another source of resistance to change away from passive, teacher-centred educational approaches comes from students themselves. They may be fearful of taking more responsibility for their own learning, and have an overly respectful view of the wisdom of the authority of the expert (teacher), based upon their own prior experience as students. This will be especially likely for those who have little formal learning experience, or whose previous education took place many years ago. Many students may also be resistant to more active learning approaches, simply because they involve more work and less convenience than studying a fixed body of information from a textbook or audiotapes and preparing for examinations that place major emphasis on memory for factual content (as opposed to acquisition of more nebulous, but perhaps more generalizable problem-solving or decision-making skills). This may explain the reluctance of a great many students in the Waterloo correspondence programme to involve themselves in campus visits or optional teleconferences. Similar findings with respect to the Athabasca programme have been reported by Rubin (1985).

Such sources of resistance imply that it will not be easy to turn distance education towards philosophies and methods that might encourage lifelong learning in the sense meant by Faure. At the same time, there are several factors working in favour of such an idea. As mentioned above, many distance learners are more mature, have a broader range of life, work and even educational experience. They are in a unique position to forge links between their employment, their everyday lives, and what they learn via distance education, are generally highly motivated and, by definition, placed in a situation where they must take responsibility for guiding their own studies with only minimal help from an educational institution. Indeed, most distance

students are already successful lifelong learners: it is simply that they may not recognize the fact. They may actually devalue their achievements in non-formal learning settings such as the workplace, neighbourhood, or home, and mistakenly believe that the only worthwhile instruction is delivered via an educational institution. Other positive factors for effecting change relate to the qualities of distance educators themselves. Despite some of the pessimistic comments made above, distance education can boast of practitioners who display dedication to their work, understanding of basic learning principles, and openness to alternative teaching approaches. In fact there have already been some considerable achievements in meeting some of the criteria spelled out by Knapper and Cropley.

If distance educators accept that lifelong learning, student autonomy, and acquiring the skills to "learn how to learn" are primary goals, then they will have to go further and build upon what has already been accomplished. This may mean, among other things, an increasing concern with helping students acquire effective study skills -- and this does not simply mean skills that will serve for traditional teaching, such as rote memorization. Greater use must be made of independent learning activities, such as projects that encourage learners to exploit resources in their own community, place of work, and so on. And faculty will have to adopt roles as resource providers and facilitators, rather than serving primarily as transmitters of information or founts of expertise. This implies special training for distance teachers, especially those in dual-mode institutions where the differences between distance media and on-campus instruction are often not fully appreciated. Finally, more efforts will be required to establish learning networks and to use non-teachers as sources of advice and expertise -- for example librarians, fellow students, workmates, and others in the community with special knowledge.

It is argued here that distance education already goes further towards promoting lifelong learning than does much traditional university instruction. However, the mere existence of distance education courses -- and hence new opportunities for remote learners -- does not guarantee that what is learned will be worthwhile, even though students may succeed in fulfilling formal course requirements. If distance education merely replicates traditional instruction using new delivery media, then this will probably do little to foster student autonomy or help them acquire the necessary skills to guide their own learning throughout the rest of their lives and in a variety of life situations. Rather, it is important to build on learners' inherent capacities for independent study, and not simply use distance programmes to provide a lacklustre substitute for traditional, and often moribund, classroom teaching.

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